

Remembrance Sunday (in pandemic) 2021 'Are the little things also the big things?' Fr. Mike.

"If the lie is big enough, and you keep on saying it loud enough... people start to believe it." So said the infamous (yet chillingly astute) Nazi propaganda guru, Joseph Goebbels in the 1930's during the Second World War. It can sometimes appear to be the case that in our present age, little has changed. **World history records that seemingly small disagreements, minor injustices or blatant prejudice can often escalate into local conflicts, civil war or full-blown world war...**

History has shown that War is neither a noble nor logical undertaking, and repeatedly driven by a combination of a desire for power, control and/or (more usually) to achieve self-interest. Sadly, it was ever thus. News just in - we seem to be at 'war' (*again*) with France!

The Bayeux village has just opened their tapestry factory for a second time in anticipation (for the first time since their initial masterpiece was constructed in the 11th century)!

France is currently furious that we are blatantly stopping French fishing boats in our UK waters because they cannot prove they were fishing there before Brexit. We are equally furious, that the French have impounded a British vessel that was catching a type of mollusc in French waters, that incidentally we in this country hardly ever bother to eat...

'Scallops?'

'No, it's absolutely true!' ... which British fishermen don't even bring back here, but routinely take to France and land the catch there.

And when I say *nobody* eats scallops, I am of course I am exaggerating a little, because along with portions of Coley and Artichoke hearts, scallops are part of the Waitrose supermarket 'essential' range!

The British ship in question (*The Cornelis Gert Jan*) – was a scallop dredger. So what? Well, Scallop fishing is one of the most damaging types of fishing which completely destroys the seabed, together with the habitats of dozens of species, which is precisely why we demand to do it.... Yep, you have guessed it, in FRENCH waters!

The fundamental problem for UK fishing is that we do not catch the fish we eat, and we do not eat the fish we catch! Therefore, 75% of UK fish ends up being exported (mostly, as it happens, to the EU) while around 80% of what we eat is imported. Now this is what the Captain Birds Eye commercials don't make clear – namely that 'British' fish seems to be for arguing with the French over, and not for eating. The argument is hard to follow but runs something like this: In this country we like white flaky fish from the North Atlantic.

'Pollocks?'

'No, it's absolutely true!'

However, given that we are an island, our consumption of fish is surprisingly low, and in fact *falling*. This may have something to do with our coastal waters. So, going to war over fish seems rather pointless. Furthermore, impounding a trawler with a suspiciously Dutch name run by a Scottish group called 'McDuff Shellfish' (not a great name if you have ever eaten duff shellfish and suffered the consequences?!) seems to be a rather stupid thing to have done – especially if boats left for any length of time get that stuff left on the bottom...

'Barnacles?'

'No, it's absolutely true!' The French look like they might cut off our access to Jersey and interrupt our imports for Christmas; but if our fish look like they are trapped on the other side of the Channel with no hope of escape – don't forget, we have the urbane Kenneth

Branagh on our side: 'look lads... hundreds of little boats... quickly, into the nets...' (cue patriotic Elgar music and cut in soft focus to Nigel Farage in tears...)

Of course, this latest dispute with our Gallic friends just over the Channel really has nothing whatsoever to do with fish - no more, as some might say, than the Falkland Islands Conflict (2nd April to 14th June, 1982) was truly about sovereignty. This is simply about post-Brexit fallout and the French presidential election, during which a bit of UK bashing goes down well with the French electorate in the same way that French bashing is guaranteed to go down with the British. As long as we *remember* this, all will be well!

I know we (UK) did the same with Iceland (in the 'Cod Wars' from May 1952 to November 1956); and I also know the tabloids love any excuse to call something a 'war' **BUT** we cannot seriously go to war about FISH! (*or can we?*)

Nobody in history ever went: 'I have in my hand a piece of paper. I opened it up, and inside were just chips. Herr Hitler has nicked the haddock, and consequently, we are now at war with Germany'... Consequently, all this is easily avoided if our default setting was always the democratic approach; in other words, by simply giving the fish the choice of where *they* want to be caught. For example: 'If you want to be cooked in a white wine sauce with herbs and maybe a pinch of garlic – swim for Calais. If you prefer to end up in a fish finger sarnie, then swim the other way to blighty'; that is, if Priti Patel let's you in!



*'Give a man a fish and
you feed him for a day.
Teach a man to fish and
you annoy the French
for a lifetime'*

Red Poppies, White poppies, designer poppies – a British tradition?

The red poppy is an incredibly moving and powerful symbol. Have you noticed those special sparkly ‘designer’ poppies that some people on television and in our public life have taken to wearing, instead of the simple (traditional) paper ones produced by the Royal British Legion? I cannot remember when they appeared, and perhaps it’s just me, but for some reason I was initially fine about them, although they took a while to truly get on my nerves. Lately however, I find myself swinging from one extreme to another over this seemingly small matter. When Louie Walsh (of *The X-Factor* fame) wore a ‘blinged-up’ sparkly version of the humble poppy as a fashion accessory for his show-biz wardrobe, this got me thinking... *why* am I feeling this way? How dare television designers adapt this token of **remembrance** to blend in with their trashy aesthetic? How dare they make it twinkly? This simple flower which somehow flourished on battlefields smashed by the world’s first experience of industrialised war – a war of truly unprecedented carnage which became almost as terrifying to the statesmen who triggered it as it was to the millions on both sides who were either killed, wounded or traumatised by it.

Hamish Mann (Black Watch, WWI) succinctly captures the ripple effect of a bullet and the trail of sorrow it creates along the way: *‘A rifle fired... a groaning man sank down to die... an anguished prayer to his white lips leapt... far on a highland hill, cattle browsing lie; a woman wept.’* This is sadly still true today.

Such was the international shock, that even after our side had ‘won’, nobody could bring themselves to **remember** it with anything other than unalloyed sorrow. No victory arches, no triumphal parades, but with the plain, mournful Cenotaph and a tradition of wearing paper versions of the flowers that had grown among the dead – the petals with which

Mother Nature had rebuked the murderousness of men. This is why I understand the subtle point they are trying to make, and therefore disagree, in the first instance, with those who abstain from wearing the red poppy, choosing to display a white one (for peace) instead. To me, the poppy is *already* a pacifist rather than a martial symbol – a sign that war should be rejected at almost all costs. The red poppy represents the consensus that existed after the armistice. Not a military or political consensus, but an emotional one – an overwhelming sense that the indiscriminate bloodletting of total war is too horrifying ever to be forgotten. That only in *solemn* remembrance can any sense be made of those millions of deaths. On that simple point, almost everyone was, and continues to be, agreed.

And for the symbol to be powerful, free from transient fashion, and indeed enduringly meaningful, it needs to be uniform – as uniform as the franchise. Perhaps we should all wear the same poppy, or it could be like some of us saying “I’m Spartacus” in a funny voice? By encouraging the sparkly poppy, TV producers almost literally gild the lily, and may even risk glamourising war. HOWEVER: this consensus is only powerful if it is **genuine**, and genuinely **voluntary**. Remember Charlene White? She was an ITN News presenter who refused to wear a poppy on TV. Some viewers of the BBC have also complained about ‘poppy absence’ during *Strictly Come Dancing*. The Labour MP Gerry Sutcliff once complained that *Google* had a poppy which was too small on their site, claiming that it must be ‘Spectacular’ in order to be authentic otherwise it is ‘demeaning’. The effect of these criticisms is corrosive. It means that people on TV or appearing in public will come to wear poppies primarily to avoid fielding disapproval – in fact they are undoubtedly doing so already. Privately they may buy and wear a poppy as an act of remembrance, or they may not, but publicly they will wear them for a quiet life. “Lest we Forget” will be reduced to the level of remembering to check your flies are done up. That is no longer consensus, it is

merely bland conformity. If this disturbing development goes unchallenged, the next chapter of the poppy story is inevitable: if people have to wear them to be deemed respectable, then gradually more people will start refusing as a gesture against the establishment. The poppy will cease to be a symbol of the horrors of war and of sacrifices made, and it will be reduced to a political badge of the status quo. The Unknown Soldier will be in danger of being displaced by Rishi Sunak, and the Fallen will be forgotten as a direct result of the efforts of those who wish to enforce their remembrance!

It is wonderfully humane and deeply moving if everyone wears a poppy during periods of remembrance – BUT only if they do not feel they *have* to do so, and wouldn't be afraid not to. Otherwise, we might just as well spruce up our poppies with sequins or anything else for that matter, because (like our crucifixes perhaps?) they will have stopped meaning anything at all. The main point is that we continue to REMEMBER and reflect as individuals and as a community. Our Christian antidote to the words of Goebbels (quoted at the beginning) is also true – that if the GOSPEL is genuinely proclaimed, people will in time come to accept it and the world will be healed by equal concern and respect.



Fr. Mike (Remembrance Sunday 14th November 2021)